

Tales Out of Church

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Tales Out of Church

Like a rite of passage, I think every FoLC fanfic writer is eventually tempted to write a revelation story. This is my take on it.

Thanks to Karen W. for encouraging me to continue this story when I was unsure about it. It's due to her that this did not get deleted from my hard drive. Also, thanks to Wendy R. for reading this in progress and giving me her honest (and very valuable) opinion. Finally, thank you to the readers from Zoom's message board who provided excellent feedback and encouragement. It is, as always, much appreciated.

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"Chocolate torte in raspberry sauce," the burly ex-Marine said as he placed two large slabs of cake in front of his niece, Lois Lane, and her partner, Clark Kent.

"Oh, Uncle Mike, no..." Her voice trailed off at the sight of the gorgeous dessert. Mike Lane smiled to himself. He could almost hear the wheels turning in her head as she convinced herself that she really should indulge in the gooey chocolate treat in front of her. Clark, on the other hand, didn't hesitate. He immediately dove in, eagerly forking the delicious cake into his mouth.

Lois picked up her fork and smiled happily. "Well, I guess I could just move into my gym for a month."

"Mmmm, this is great," Clark moaned in delight.

"He does all the baking himself," Lois imparted to her partner, beaming proudly at her uncle.

Mike Lane sighed. "Lately more of a hobby than a job."

Clark looked around, puzzled. "I just don't understand what happened to this neighbourhood."

The street was certainly very bleak looking. Mike's restaurant looked like an oasis in the middle of the burned out apartment buildings and boarded up storefronts. The piles of trash and the abandoned cars really didn't establish the ambience that he wanted for his restaurant.

"Well, the neighbourhood's in transition. Getting more ... eclectic. Kind of like Saigon without the jets." Mike regarded the street with a calmness that was completely at odds to his niece's firecracker ways.

Clark glanced up at Mike as he was speaking only to look down and discover that he had dribbled some of his raspberry sauce on his tie.

As he grabbed his napkin to blot the stain, Lois noticed and put her two cents in. "Better get some water on that. Remember, dab, don't wipe."

Clark nodded and headed into the restaurant in search of the washroom.

Mike promptly sat down with his niece who turned to him in concern. "Clark's right. This is crazy. Six months ago, this was the hottest street in town."

Meanwhile, in the washroom, Clark dabbed carefully at his soiled tie. He turned away from the sink in time to see a gang member, a member of the Skins judging by his colours, setting off a firebomb at the alley entrance of Mike's restaurant. Clark whipped his glasses off as the Skins member turned to take off. Much to his chagrin, the kid ran right into Metropolis's resident Super-hero who quickly put the fire out with his super-breath.

"Man, you just stepped over a line and you're going down!"

Superman smiled sardonically as he stuck the gang member's hand through a dumpster handle and moulded it around his wrist so he couldn't get away. "You're the only one going anywhere. Hope you don't mind showering in groups."

Lois and her uncle came running pell-mell around the corner and into the alley as Superman took off with a wave.

Mike coolly surveyed the juvenile delinquent before turning to Lois in disgust. "Little punk tried to burn me out."

"Can't prove that, man. Can't prove nothing. Nobody saw a thing!"

Clark emerged through the smouldering restaurant door. "I did."

Mike looked at Clark and smiled his approval as Clark fumbled his glasses out of his jacket pocket and put them on. Clark's eyes met Mike's in a startled glance the instant before he had the glasses safely on his nose. Mike idly noted that the younger man looked quite different without his spectacles. Clark looked worried, Mike thought. He must be apprehensive about being a witness.

Lois missed the byplay completely as she searched in her purse for her cell phone. "I'm calling the police," she announced triumphantly as she dialled the phone.

"Take your shoes off and get comfortable," her uncle told her. "Last time I called, they took two hours."

"Yes, I'm reporting an attempted arson. My name is Lois Lane..." Lois pulled the phone away from her ear and stared at it incredulously. "He put me on hold."

"Lois Lane? You're Lois Lane?" the gang member asked, laughing patronizingly.

Lois glared at him. "I'm sorry. Have we met?"

"No, we ain't met. It's just funny to me 'cause ... you're dead. I mean, I know you're walking around but trust me, lady, go pick out a nice grave. And from what I hear, pick it out fast."

The stranger's words hung ominously in the air as Lois, Mike and Clark waited silently for the police to arrive.

The Next Night

Mike Lane was fighting valiantly, fighting for his life, but he recognised that it wasn't going to be enough to save him this time. The leader of the Skins tossed a knife from one hand to the other, taunting him, obviously having fun, like a cat with a mouse. Mike steeled himself for the thrust, not willing to let these delinquents see him flinch from his fate. The punk pulled his arm back, the knife flashing in the dim light and...

A hand caught his wrist. Mike's eyes widened as he watched the cop pull the knife away from his assailant.

"You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will..." On one side of the police officer was a punk with a baseball bat, on the other side, a man wielding a chain.

"...be used against you..."

The punk with the baseball bat tried to hit the cop who danced out of the way. He ended up walloping his chain-wielding friend who promptly dropped like a stone. The guy with the bat swung at the cop once more, only to have the police officer grab the end of it and launch the punk into a pile of garbage cans.

"...in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you."

The leader of the Skins shouted defiantly, adopted a karate stance and ran at the cop who promptly stiff-armed him, letting him fall into a limp heap at his feet.

"Do you understand these rights as I have explained them to you?"

The leader groaned.

"Officer," Mike pointed out, tentatively. "I think that was a yes."

The cop started to move away fast. "I'll go call for, uh..."

"Backup?" Mike finished, still stunned by the cop's swift actions.

"Yeah."

Mike turned. He could hear the sounds of sirens coming closer. "Looks like it's already on the way." He turned back in time to see the cop look back at him one more time before disappearing around a corner.

"Clark?" he whispered to himself. "That was Clark?" He fumbled for a chair and sat down, hard.

4 Nights later

Lois danced dreamily around her apartment listening to the haunting strains of 'Fly Me to the Moon.' She was relaxed, glad that her uncle would be all right. She was so grateful to Superman. She hadn't had much of a chance to speak to her uncle about it, but she was meeting him for breakfast the next day. They'd talk then. She was so thankful that Superman had come through for her once more. She glided and twirled and came to a stop, startled by the arrival of the super-hero she had just been thinking about.

"I just dropped in to say thanks for your advice the other night," he said with a warm smile.

"You're welcome ... Officer." Lois giggled before continuing, "My uncle will want to bake the anonymous cop a cake."

Superman smiled in amusement. "Well, tell him I retired from the force, but I'll still be looking out for him ... and you, too."

"I know," Lois replied in a soft murmur.

Superman turned to the window intending to leave only to stop when Lois asked him a tentative question.

"Would you ... like to dance?"

"That sounds nice," he replied to her delight.

They moved together and started to sway back and forth to the music.

"I like this song," he said.

"Do you? I've been thinking. I don't know very much about you. I don't know what kind of music you like, what your favourite colour is. I didn't even know you could dance."

"This isn't dancing," Superman said.

"It's not?" Lois asked, puzzled.

"This is," he stated firmly as they floated up off the floor. Lois felt a thrill of pleasure shoot through her as they glided smoothly through the air.

Later, much later, while Lois lay quietly in her bed waiting to fall asleep, the thrill still hadn't worn off. Superman was just the ... the dreamiest man she could imagine - so gallant and romantic. And so good-looking, too. He was different from any other man she had ever met. Somehow, he seemed to be separate from normal, petty, human behaviour. She couldn't imagine him telling a lie or making a mistake. He was perfect. More than perfect. Once, she had described him as a Greek God. Now, she saw no reason to change that description.

Lois sighed happily and shifted position slightly. So far, she showed no signs of getting to sleep, but that didn't matter. It just meant that she had more time to indulge in her favourite nocturnal activity - fantasizing about Superman.

Oh, if only she could be with him for one night - one perfect night. She knew exactly how she wanted it to be. He would hold her in his arms - those manly, muscular arms - and then he would kiss her tenderly before pulling back a bit and smiling at her lovingly. Then she would ask him the question that burned inside of her. She would ask him how he felt about her. He would smile at her again, and then he would say those three magic words that she burned to hear him say, and then ... and then ...

And then as always, to her frustration, Lois's well of inspiration ran dry.

She wanted to fantasize about him kissing and caressing her, about kissing and caressing him, but she just couldn't. He seemed so far above all human, petty desires. She could no more imagine him being with her in that way than she could imagine him, oh, going to a movie with her or playing cards with Jimmy and Perry.

Her mood changed from elation to desperation. She loved him; she knew that, and she thought he might have special feelings for her, too - at least she hoped he did - although he didn't come out and say anything to her. He had rejected her after all. But, he did keep dropping in on her. He wouldn't do that if he felt nothing for her,

would he? Or did he just think of her as a friend? It hadn't seemed as if that were all it was tonight. He had seemed to be treating her in a romantic fashion. She chased her thoughts in circles, unable to come to any firm conclusion.

Or maybe, she just wasn't good enough for him. He was perfect, and Lois knew that she was most definitely not perfect. At that thought, all her doubts and fears came flooding in from the dark, hidden place that she had crammed them into. What reason in the world was there for Superman to want her, Lois Lane? Even Clark had turned away from her, preferring Mayson Drake's company.

Clark's friendship had been a constant in Lois's life for so long now that Lois was having a hard time dealing with this new upset. She needed him ... as a friend she was quick to qualify. And she wanted him in her life ... again, as a friend. At least they had made up their fight. Lois had told Perry that she would always have Clark as a friend but, lying here in the dark, Lois forced herself to face the truth.

If Clark really did want to be with Mayson, Lois knew that that would be it. Mayson didn't like Lois. She wouldn't tolerate a boyfriend spending time outside of work with another woman even in the most platonic way. Why in the world would he choose a 'best friend' over a girlfriend? And why wouldn't he want to be with Mayson? The woman adored him; she catered to his ego. And she wasn't that bad looking, Lois admitted grudgingly.

It was easier in a way for Mayson, Lois thought. Mayson wasn't in love with Superman. Lois wondered if she, herself, weren't in love with Superman, could she have been interested in someone like Clark? Maybe. Actually, thinking about it, probably, she admitted truthfully. Clark was a special friend. He was kind and sweet and courteous and sensitive and well, he was very good looking, too - not as gorgeous as Superman but definitely nothing to sneer at. If she had got to know him before Superman turned up, well, maybe Lois might have taken a chance on him. Instead, Superman had turned up, long before Lois had realised what a ... a treasure Clark Kent really was, and that was that. One look at Superman and Lois couldn't begin to think of another man, instead preferring to dream of what might be with the super-hero.

But dreams don't keep you warm at night, she told herself brutally. Dreams don't hold you in their arms. You can't have a future with dreams.

For the first time, Lois saw what her love for Superman was keeping her from. For the first time, she saw what she had lost by shutting herself away from taking a chance on life.

Instead of drifting off to sleep buoyed by warm thoughts of Superman, Lois cried herself to sleep, counting her faults and mourning the coming loss of her friend.

It was a tired and cranky Lois Lane that made her way to her Uncle Mike's for Sunday brunch. Since she had gotten up a little over an hour earlier, she had, more than once, been on the verge of calling her uncle to cancel. It was only the overwhelming sense of loneliness

that still lingered from her gloomy thoughts of the night before that forced her to look for company. What she really wanted to do was to call Clark and ask him to join her, but after last night when he had switched his allegiance to Mayson, no way.

Lois ignored the little voice inside her head that logically pointed out that it was Mayson who made the big play for Clark rather than the other way around. No, if Clark hadn't been willing to be with Mayson, he would have made his feelings clear. The little voice inside her head then pointed out that Clark was gentle and kind and never, ever rude and ... she silently snarled to herself. She didn't really want to cut Clark any slack. No, she wanted to wallow in her foul mood - really savour every unforgiving thought.

She managed to greet her uncle courteously. His warm welcome did a lot to make some of her negative feelings dissipate.

"Hey, sweetie. How're you doing today?" He planted a hearty smack on her cheek.

"Hi, Uncle Mike." Lois returned his hug and looked around the restaurant. It wasn't crowded by any means, but there were two other couples sitting outside just finishing their meals. "Business is picking up, I see."

"It sure is. And it's all due to you. You and that partner of yours." Mike squeezed her arm gently as he looked around his restaurant in pride. "Anyway, have a seat, sweetie. I have to get these guys their bills and then we can talk in peace." He disappeared at a fast clip into the back of the restaurant.

"Don't forget Superman helped too..." Lois called after his retreating back. He didn't seem to hear her. Lois sighed and picked an inside table to sit at. She felt that her grumpy mood wouldn't survive outside in the sunshine and she wanted to hold on to it for a little while longer. Although, after eyeing the dessert display case, she figured her grumpy mood was nearly a thing of the past. Man, oh, man, her uncle knew what to do with chocolate!

It didn't take long for Mike to deal with the bills and the payments. He came to join her carrying a couple of cups of coffee and a couple of pieces of rich, chocolate cake. One look at the incredible chocolate confection and Lois felt her mood immediately begin to lighten. "Thanks, Uncle Mike. I need this today." Lois picked up her fork and dove right in.

Mike smiled at her fondly before picking up his own fork. "Why's that, sweetheart?"

"Oh, I don't know. It's been a tense couple of days. The story was a lot of work, and I was really worried about you, and, well," Lois waved her fork around, "there's been a lot of other things happening that made me tense."

Mike looked around his restaurant and grinned. "At least you don't have to worry about me anymore. That 'cop' took care of the last of my problems."

Lois smiled happily. "Yes, and we both know who that cop really was, don't we?"

Mike nodded.

"Clark." "Superman."

"Superman?" "Clark?"

"No, it was..." "I know it was..."

"But I saw him..." "But he told me..."

They fell silent, exchanging puzzled glances.

Lois opened her mouth and enunciated clearly. "Are you telling me that Clark... that he... all those guys...?"

"I saw him, Lois. His face was hidden by his hat, but he looked back at me just before he went around a corner and I saw him. He wasn't wearing his glasses, but it was Clark. I'm sure of it."

"But why would Superman say it was him?" Lois asked, falteringly.

"Did he come right out and say that?"

Lois thought for a moment. "He sort of implied it. I said that you wanted to bake him a cake, you know, to say thanks and," she paused for a second, concentrating hard, "he said something like 'tell him I retired from the force.' That sounds like Superman was saying that it was him helping you out."

"Well, I'll admit that Clark looks really different without his glasses, but I saw him without them the other day. And then the other night, I got a really good look at him. It was Clark."

Lois frowned down at the remnants of the chocolate cake on her plate. "I just don't understand."

"Neither do I," Mike said, "unless... Nah!" He shook his head emphatically only to pause a second later. "But they do look alike," he said, quietly, almost to himself.

Lois pounced on his last comment. "Superman and Clark? Uncle Mike, they don't look alike. Well, okay, they both have dark hair and brown eyes, and I think they're about the same height and weight, and Clark does have lots of muscles - I saw him half-naked once; don't worry it was perfectly innocent - and we know that Superman has muscles, too, because the suit does nothing to hide them, and ... Oh, my God! They do look alike!" She looked up at her uncle with an appalled expression on her face. "Oh, my God! Clark... and Superman... and they both... Oh, my God!" Much to her uncle's dismay, Lois started to hyperventilate.

"Sweetie, calm down! Take a deep breath ... That's good. Take another."

Lois complied with her uncle's suggestion, taking deep breaths until she was able to sit and look at him relatively calmly.

"Are you okay?" Mike asked in concern.

Lois nodded, her eyes still looking a little wild.

"Let's look at this logically, honey. Have you ever seen the two of them together?"

Lois concentrated hard. "Well, there was the time that ... no, Clark left before Superman got there. And then there was ... no, Superman left before Clark showed up. But then ... no, not then either." She looked at her uncle, her eyes wide. "No, I've never seen them at the same time," she admitted, reluctantly. "Why would I when they're the same person?" she said slowly, drawing each word out.

"Are you sure, Lois?"

His niece slowly nodded, her eyes fixed on his. "A minute ago, I would have argued with you about it. Now, after thinking about it, I know for sure."

"Wow." Her uncle sat back in his chair and looked off into space before turning his attention back to his niece. "I don't know what to say."

"I do," Lois stated emphatically, once again breathing hard. "That rat! That piece of worm-ridden fish bait! That..."

"Why the heck are you angry?" Mike asked sounding surprised at her reaction.

"Well, wouldn't you be? He lied to me. He treated me like a fool. He..."

"When did he do that?" Mike asked, leaning forward and taking her hand in his. "What did he do?"

"Are you serious, Uncle Mike? He... he misrepresented himself to me. He pretended to be something that he's not!"

"When was he pretending? When he was Clark? Or when he was Superman?"

Lois's mouth fell open as she looked at her uncle in shock. Wow. Talk about the sixty-four thousand dollar question. When was he pretending? Was Clark Kent just an act? Or was Superman? "I... I don't know," she stuttered. "I can't answer that."

"Well, it seems to me, Lois, that you haven't even had a chance to figure out the questions yet, let alone the answers."

"I guess you're right, Uncle Mike. I do need to do some thinking."

Just then, a couple came in for lunch.

"Here's your chance, sweetheart," Mike said as he patted her arm. "I have to look after these two. You just sit - I'll bring you more coffee - and you think. It'll be a while before I can join you again."

"Thanks, Uncle Mike. That'd be great... Oh, do you think I could have

another piece of cake, too? I'm really in the mood for chocolate. I need all the help I can get right now."

Mike Lane nodded and gave her a thumbs-up as he headed for the customers. Lois settled back in her chair. Her uncle was right. She did have a lot of thinking to do.

Mike kept a surreptitious eye on his niece as he took the young couple's orders and quickly prepared their food. She alternated between writing frantically in her notepad and staring off into space. At least she wasn't running shrieking from the restaurant, Mike reflected. That was a definite plus.

Mike couldn't get over his newfound knowledge about Clark. It was amazing to think that he had met Superman on a personal level - of course, he had met the super-hero when he had taken Baby Rage into custody - but this was different. Clark had eaten in his restaurant, was a friend of his niece and had, from what Lois had reported to him, gone out of his way to help when the Skins had attacked Mike.

From his time in the Marines, Mike still remembered the value of a well-kept secret. Clark Kent and his secret had nothing to fear from Mike Lane. After what Clark had done for Mike, not just once but twice, there was no way that he would ever do anything to hurt that man in any way. Mike glanced at Lois once again. She was looking upset again and angry, chewing on her upper lip as she tapped her pen on the table. Perhaps he could start paying off his debt to Clark Kent by calming Lois Lane down.

The young couple finished their meal and paid, enabling Mike to rejoin his niece.

"Are you doing okay, sweetheart?"

Lois jumped at the intrusion. "Huh? Oh. Yeah, I guess so... no, not really, Uncle Mike. I'm mad - really, really mad."

"Why?" Mike leaned forward to hear Lois's answer.

"He didn't trust me, Uncle Mike, and that really hurts," she said, looking down at the table avoiding his gaze.

"Why do you say that?" Mike asked.

Lois looked up at him defiantly at that question. "It's simple. We're friends. He said I was his best friend. He should have trusted me. He should have told me."

"Lois," Mike said softly as he laid a gentle hand on her arm. "There are some things we don't tell anyone, not even our friends. Have you told Clark everything about yourself?"

"Everything that counts," Lois spat out indignantly.

"Oh, and I suppose you told him about the time that you and Lucy just about got arrested when you..."

"Okay, okay!" Lois interrupted. "Maybe I don't tell him everything, but this is big. This is mind-boggling. It's, it's life-altering!"

"Oh, I'll agree with that description, Lois, but it's Clark's life not yours that it's altered."

"I don't understand what you mean," Lois exclaimed in frustration.

Mike took her hands in his and leaned even closer to her. "Why would a man like Clark hide what he can do from the world? Because, Lois, by pretending to be two separate people, that's effectively what he's done."

Lois looked up at him, stricken by his words. "I don't know, Uncle Mike. I guess I hadn't thought about it."

Mike laughed and patted her hand. "Well, don't beat yourself up about it, sweetie. You just found out about this less than an hour ago. I think you can give yourself till tomorrow before you start shouldering the blame for not having all the answers."

Lois couldn't keep from giggling, grateful to have the tension broken even for just a minute. Turning serious, she regarded her uncle solemnly. "I guess," she said slowly, "that Clark has reasons, valid reasons to keep this a secret. He's ticked off quite a few criminals since his rather splashy debut into crime-fighting, and if he had done that as Clark Kent rather than Superman, well, his parents would be in danger."

"Maybe even his friends too. His best friend most of all."

Lois's eyes grew wide. "I never thought of that. But why would he have to keep it a secret from me?"

Mike regarded his niece seriously. "Why don't you tell me?"

"I can't, Uncle Mike. I don't know." Lois shook her head in agitation.

"I think you'll be able to figure it out if you think about it, Lois. Just talk. Tell me what you're thinking. Tell me what jumps out at you. Isn't that what you told me you like to do when you get stuck with a story?"

Lois smiled warmly at her uncle. "Do you remember everything I tell you?"

Mike grinned back. "Yep. You know that I think of you and your sister as my kids, too. I'm pretty proud of the two of you. Of course I remember what you have to say."

Lois's expression softened as she regarded her uncle affectionately. "Thanks, Uncle Mike. You don't know how much I like having you in my life. God knows my own father doesn't pay any attention to me."

"Hey, I don't want to hear any of that from you. Sam may not have been the perfect father..."

Lois snorted, the noise punctuating her uncle's comment.

"...but he's the only father you've got, and for that reason deserves a little respect."

"A little is all he'll get from me," Lois retorted, bitterly.

"Ah, honey, you know he loves you. He's just not very good at expressing his emotions."

Lois looked at her uncle, a wan smile on her face. "I would definitely call that an understatement, Uncle Mike. That's the reason I love you so much. I always know where I stand with you. Thanks for being there for me."

"Hey, you're welcome, sweetheart. I love you, too. Now, enough of this mushy stuff. All my Marine buddies would rib me if they heard me getting all sentimental like this." Mike grinned at his niece, taking the sting out of his words. "Okay, spill it. Tell me about Clark. Tell me about Superman. And tell me about you and the two of them."

"Okay, Uncle Mike." Lois took a deep breath, noisily exhaled and started talking. "The first time I met Clark, I can't say I was too impressed by him. I was too excited about a lead on a story to pay attention to him..."

Forty-five minutes later, Lois brought her recitation to a halt and took a big gulp of her now cold coffee. Noting his niece's grimace, Mike jumped to his feet. "Here, let me get you a fresh cup."

"Thanks." Lois arched her back and stretched her arms in an effort to loosen up.

Mike brought her full cup back and sat back down. He surveyed his empty restaurant and sighed. "Well, business is better, but I can't exactly call it booming yet, can I?"

"That'll come, Uncle Mike. You know it will."

"I sure hope so, Lois. I sure hope so." Mike brought his attention back to his niece. "So, any insights?"

Lois grimaced. "Maybe. I think so, but I'm not what you would call thrilled."

Mike leaned back and grinned. "You know, Lois, I could tell."

Lois smiled wanly before continuing, "I'd say that I'm part of the reason, a big part of the reason, that Clark didn't tell me."

"Yeah, I figured that part out from what you've said about your relationship with him and with Superman."

"I focused on Superman instead of on Clark and, well, I think I was the one who kept myself from having a clear picture of either one of them." Lois sighed. "I can't even begin to imagine how I made him

feel when I turned him down as Clark only to throw myself at Superman." She shook her head before looking at her uncle, a stricken expression on her face. "I must have hurt him so much, Uncle Mike. I feel terrible about that. He must have been in so much pain."

"I think you did hurt him, Lois," Mike said, softly. "I've only had a small taste of being categorised by what I am instead of who I am, but I have to tell you, it does hurt. It hurts a lot."

"What do you mean?" Lois asked as she regarded her uncle quizzically.

"Everything changed after 'Nam, Lois. Suddenly, every Marine had a new image. We were baby-killers, war-mongering rednecks out to take over the world. It got to the point where it was hard to walk down the street when we were on leave. Nobody on the outside took the time to get to know us as individuals. They just labelled us all as these aggressive, bloodthirsty, raping, pillaging, sons of..." Mike stopped himself with a visible effort. "Sorry, honey. I nearly forgot to watch my mouth around you."

"It's okay, Uncle Mike. I've heard worse."

"Not from me you haven't. And you won't." Mike paused, took a deep breath and let it out slowly before continuing, "If anyone had taken the time to find out, they would have seen that we were all individuals. I liked to bake and cook. Pete played the harmonica like an angel. We used to listen to him for hours. Artie was, well, Lois, he was the most incredible artist. He could capture what we were feeling on paper so accurately and yet it looked so effortless for him. It really hurt to be labelled the way we were, to not be seen for ourselves but only as things. I think you did hurt Clark, Lois. I think you did see only what he could do, instead of who he is."

Lois was silent for a long time, digesting her uncle's words. He didn't talk about his time in the Marines much. If she hadn't been convinced of his pain by the expression in his voice, that fact alone would have been enough to prove the truth of his words to her. "I have to make it up to him, Uncle Mike. I have to make it up to Clark," Lois said, steely resolve in her voice.

"That's all well and good, sweetheart, but first, you have to decide what you feel for him. Are you in love with Clark?"

Lois bit her lip. "I don't know. I thought I was in love with Superman but now I'm not sure. I've been having doubts. It's hard to visualise a future with a crime-fighting super-hero."

Mike snorted. "I guess so! It's hard enough to visualise having a future with anyone, let alone someone highly visible and respected like that!"

Lois giggled. "Somehow, I just can't quite picture Superman taking out the garbage."

"Or mowing the lawn," Mike retorted.

"Or buying groceries."

"Or doing his laundry. Can you imagine him in a Laundromat scrubbing his capes?"

Lois giggled before continuing, "Or going to a show."

"Or playing poker with his buddies."

Lois's expression suddenly sobered. "Or being in love," she said, softly.

"Oh, honey, I don't want to hear anything like that from you." Mike leaned forward to place his large hand on top of her smaller one. "It's obvious how he feels about you. I saw that the other day. He's crazy about you."

Lois looked down at the table. "I don't know about that, Uncle Mike," she said, quietly. "Why would he be? He could have anyone in the whole world. He's Superman. Why would he want me?"

"Is he really Superman, Lois, or does he think of himself as Clark Kent, mild-mannered reporter and part-time super-hero?" Mike tipped her face up to meet her eyes with his own.

"Yeah, I guess so," Lois admitted. "But why would he want me?" she repeated. "He's got Mayson chasing after him, and, I hate to admit it, but she's really pretty and smart and..."

"Now, honey. Don't you let me hear you talking like that. You're Lois Lane. You're better than any blonde assistant District Attorney. Now you, you're an award-winning reporter. You've won Kerths..."

"So has he," Lois interrupted.

"Only one and you know that was a fluke; you told me so. You'll beat him next year," Mike said as he gently squeezed her hand. Lois smiled weakly in response, and then he continued, "As I was saying, you're an award-winning journalist, you're smart and persistent and tenacious and intuitive and..."

"Yeah, I'm a really hard worker. That sounds like a sterling quality for a girlfriend," Lois retorted, sarcastically.

"I'm not done yet," Mike said with a laugh. Becoming more serious again, he continued, "You're also beautiful - stunning in fact - and I'm not just saying that because you're my niece. And you're lively and fun and passionate about things that matter to you and you have a lot of love in your heart just waiting for the right person. I know that. I've been able to see that for years."

"Oh, Uncle Mike, I wish I could believe all that," Lois said, on the verge of tears.

Mike cupped her cheek tenderly. "Lois, it doesn't matter if Clark has a reason to love you or not. Just know one thing - he does love you. I saw it in his eyes when he looked at you. And from everything you told me about him, and about Superman, he's loved you from the minute he met you."

Lois gazed warmly at her uncle through a haze of tears. "I'm still not convinced, but there's one thing I know for a fact."

"What's that?"

"I love you, Uncle Mike."

"I love you, too, sweetheart."

Lois walked home from her uncle's restaurant in a daze with one question running constantly through her mind. Did she love Clark? It was a hard question to answer in the wake of her startling discovery. She felt so confused. He was her friend, her best friend, and now, she felt as if she didn't know him at all, like he was a stranger.

Did she love Clark? She knew she wanted him in her life. She remembered that when he had quit the Planet last year during the heat wave, she had felt like someone had reached into her chest and ripped out her heart. She knew that he made her feel unexpected joy when she was around him when she had long ago decided that joy had no place in her life. She knew that she counted on him to support her, and she wanted to support him in return. Yes, if that was love then she loved him. She just didn't know who the heck he was anymore.

That was going to have to be her first order of business - getting to know Clark for who he really was. And doing it without letting on what she knew. She wasn't ready to face him without the protection of his alter ego standing between them. She wasn't sure enough of his feelings for her to do that.

One thing she did know, though. She was going to have to treat Clark Kent a lot better. She had been thoughtless and insensitive and, knowing what she knew now, at times downright cruel. That was all going to change.

"Lois, are you feeling okay?" Clark asked in concern.

"Sure, Clark. Why do you ask?" Lois responded, a tinge of pink staining her cheeks. She pointedly kept her eyes focused on her computer monitor.

"I don't know, Lois. I'm just not used to... You're acting... I don't know. You're just different from how you normally are." Clark leaned forward onto his elbows, intently studying his petite partner from the vantage point of his desk.

"I don't know what you mean," she answered with a shy, quick glance at him before she turned back to her monitor. The pink colour in her cheeks deepened visibly.

"You're just being so, so nice to me," Clark retorted. "I mean, you got me at least three cups of coffee this morning, and you offered to pick up my dry-cleaning, and you didn't argue with me when I criticized your spelling, and then you practically arm wrestled poor Ralph for the last donut which you didn't even want but thought that I might. I mean, that's just... not you." Clark said with a grin in his voice. "Where's Lois Lane, and what have you done to her?"

"Hey, Ralph deserved what he got. He should have backed down when I told him I had dibs on that donut. It's his fault that he tripped over my foot, not mine."

"I'm not going to even touch that argument," Clark said with a laugh. "But why all the sudden attention from you? I'm not complaining, mind you, but I'm not used to it."

Lois turned her chair to face Clark. "That's ridiculous, Clark. We're best friends. We look out for each other. You do stuff for me all the time, and I've always tried to do stuff for you, too." "You have?" Clark asked, his eyebrows disappearing into his hairline.

"Of course I have, Clark. I've done... lots of things for you. I've, I've, um... well, I'm sure that I'll think of a whole bunch of stuff later, but right now, I have to finish this story or Perry'll have my neck." With that, Lois turned back to her computer and started typing frantically.

Clark shook his head and returned to his own work.

It was with two heartfelt sighs of satisfaction that Lois and Clark both hit 'enter' a few seconds apart to send their stories to Perry.

Lois stretched back in her chair, her spine arched backward and her arms extended over her head. From the corner of her eye, much to her satisfaction, she could see Clark regarding her appreciatively as she tried to work the kinks out. He dropped his gaze when she turned to face him. Maybe Uncle Mike was right, at least a little bit right!

"So, partner," she said, softly, bolstered by his appreciative glances. "Feel like grabbing a bite somewhere?"

A big grin spread over his face much to her delight. "I'd love to," he answered enthusiastically. "Should we go to a restaurant, or grab take-out?"

"Um, let's go grab a table at that new Indian place, if that's okay with you," Lois suggested, not ready to face being alone with him yet. She took a deep breath and then felt words spill from her mouth, out of her conscious control. "But if you're not in the mood for Indian, there's that great Thai place around the corner, or the Chinese place just down the block. Have you ever thought about how lucky we are in Metropolis to have so many choices when it comes to places to eat? And eating food from other people's cultures can be educational if you have the right attitude about it. Although, I can never remember if I was born in the year of the Rat, or Ox, or Horse. I wonder if that really means anything when you get right down to it. I'll have to reread that next time we go for Chinese. And the restaurants always have information on the backs of the menus about what the different types of food signify and why they eat the combination of foods they do, although it probably wasn't a good idea for the Indian place to put the information down that the heavy spices in their food was originally intended to disguise the taste of

bad meat and to prevent the consumer from getting sick from eating it, and..." Lois paused to take a breath, letting her words trail off into an awkward silence. She couldn't look Clark in the face; she was too embarrassed by her latest attack of verbal diarrhoea. And from the feel of it, she was blushing again.

"Indian sounds great," Clark was quick to interject, sounding somewhat overwhelmed. Lois didn't blame him for feeling that way. She had gone off on a tangent again, hadn't she? She took a deep breath, trying to calm herself down. Clark had never made her nervous before. Superman had, but never like this. The super-hero had seemed so remote and untouchable before. He had never threatened her emotional control. Why was that, she wondered. She had loved Superman, she knew that for a fact, but, even though he had made her completely nervous and flustered, she had never felt threatened by him.

Lois snuck a peek at Clark as they waited for the elevator. He looked the same as always, and yet everything was so different. One thing that had changed was how nervous he made her. He made her knees wobble and put butterflies in her stomach, and she was finding it very hard not to blurt her new knowledge out to him. But she didn't want to, not yet. She wanted to guard it close and take her time to really get to understand what made Clark Kent tick. She had made so many mistakes in her personal life in the past, and she had seen her parents suffer from their own mistakes. She was in no hurry to jump into anything with both feet. This was one time she felt the better course of valour was to be cautious.

But this was so hard, she complained to herself as she silently entered the elevator beside him. Every time she looked at Clark, she couldn't help wondering if he had the Superman outfit on under his work clothes. If she pretended to trip and he caught her and she just let her hands land on his chest, would she be able to feel it? Where did he hide the boots? What about the cape? With an effort, Lois wrenched her thoughts away from the mundane details to fix on the greater truth. Clark was Superman. Clark was the 'Greek God' that she had put up on a pedestal. But Clark was so normal, she wailed to herself. Okay, he did have a few quirks. He did disappear at odd moments - and boy, was it ever nice to finally know why! - and he had done a few strange things from time to time. She now knew how he had got her that bouquet of flowers the one time when he had pretended to do a magic trick. She sucked in her breath as she realised what a chance he had taken that day with his identity.

"I'm sorry, Lois. Did you say something?" Clark asked as they exited the elevator.

"What? Oh, sorry, Clark. I was just thinking about something," Lois said with an apologetic smile.

"Is something bothering you? You've been pretty distracted today."

"No, it's okay, Clark. I'm fine." Lois plastered a warm smile onto her face. "I'm sorry for ignoring you. So, any leads that you want to follow next, or are we still fishing for our next story?"

Clark surreptitiously watched Lois as she solemnly studied the menu.

She was acting so completely and totally weird today; he was hoping that she would say something soon that would help him make sense of her behaviour.

"Do you want to order a dinner for two, or individual dishes?" he asked.

"Let's order the dinner for two, Clark. If that's okay with you," she hastily added.

"That's fine."

"Oh, good," she replied with a giggle and a relieved smile. "What would you like, mild, medium, spicy or extra-spicy?"

"You pick, Lois. I'll go along with what you want."

"But what if I pick the wrong thing, Clark? What if I choose spicy when you really prefer mild? Or what if you have a secret hankering for extra-spicy and I choose medium?" Her voice got louder and louder in distress as she questioned him.

"Uh, okay, if you want me to choose, medium sounds pretty good. Is that okay with you?" he asked, trying to calm her down.

Lois flashed him a brilliant smile. "If that's what you want, Clark, that's what you should get."

Definitely very weird, Clark thought to himself. This whole new 'pay attention to Clark and cater to his every wish' attitude of hers was very nice for the moment, but he already knew that he had no desire for a steady diet of it.

They closed their menus and sat in an awkward silence waiting for the waiter to appear. Lois was looking anywhere but at him. He regarded her seriously for a moment, waiting for her to speak but she didn't.

"Uh, Lois, is there anything wrong?" Clark finally asked.

"No, uh uh. Nope. Not at all. Um, why do you ask?" Lois replied as her face turned pink once again.

"Oh, no reason."

They fell into an awkward silence once again.

Clark greeted the waiter with relief when he finally came to take their dinner orders.

After the waiter left to take their order to the kitchen, Clark was determined not to suffer another moment of awkwardness. If she didn't want to talk, he would.

"Did I ever tell you about when I traveled through India?" he asked, tentatively.

"No," Lois said, eagerly. "I'd love to hear more." She leaned forward onto her elbows, her body almost straining towards him, looking at him in anticipation, her eyes luminous in the dim light of the

restaurant.

He was taken aback by the eagerness with which she greeted his question. He swallowed, his mouth suddenly dry before he could continue. "I backpacked around the world for a year before I went to college. It was great. I got to meet so many interesting people..."

As they finished their meal, Clark reflected that he had never enjoyed an evening more than he had tonight. The atmosphere was intimate, the lighting subdued. And once Lois had relaxed a bit, she had been great company. She had shared a lot of herself with him tonight. He had never known before that she had moved out when she was in her senior year at high school. She had talked openly about her relationship with her parents and how their views on life, love and marriage had affected her. He was starting to understand her more and more.

And she had been genuinely interested in what he had to say. She had asked appropriate questions at appropriate moments in his stories, she had encouraged him to express his opinion on things and had otherwise been attentive in a much more normal way than she had been earlier in the evening.

"Lois, I've had a great time tonight," he said, warmly.

"I did, too," Lois admitted shyly, looking up at him flirtatiously.

Clark's heart just about skipped a beat in his chest when he intercepted that look from her. She had only ever looked at him that way when he was wearing his 'suit' not when he was being himself. Wow! Was she finally starting to appreciate him, Clark Kent, instead of Superman? He didn't know, but he sure hoped so.

The waiter came with the bill, Clark paid over Lois's protests, and they left the restaurant.

As they strolled lazily back towards the Planet and Lois's jeep in the underground parking lot, Lois tucked her arm into Clark's much to his delight. They made idle conversation as they walked, talking about past stories and future possibilities for other ones. Nothing of import was said on the surface, but Clark was aware of emotional undercurrents to the conversation even so.

"Here we are," Clark announced as they arrived beside Lois's jeep.

"Can I give you a ride?" Lois asked, shyly.

"No, thanks, Lois. I think I'll walk," Clark answered, regretfully. He was overdue to patrol the city. He wanted to try and patrol frequently in the wake of the recent problems with the Skins and with other gangs. Otherwise, he would have jumped at the chance to extend his time with Lois.

"Oh, okay, Clark," Lois replied, sounding disappointed. She took a deep breath as if to brace herself, and then rose to the tips of her

toes to plant a quick kiss on his cheek. He was so shocked by her gesture that she had whirled quickly away and was in the driver's seat before he even noticed.

"Uh, goodnight, Lois," Clark said, still stunned.

"Goodnight, Clark," a blushing Lois said as she put her vehicle into gear.

Clark stood and watched her jeep as she drove out of his line of sight, one hand lifting to press against his cheek, still feeling the imprint of her lips on his face.

Lois drove home feeling wonderful. Clark had been such good company. He had been attentive and warm and interesting. And he had been incredibly good to look at, sitting on the other side of the table, she thought with a giggle. Why had she never noticed that before? Actually, she thought to herself with a wicked grin, she had noticed but she had chosen to ignore it. A vision of Clark clad in a towel danced in front of her eyes for a moment, causing her to nearly run a red light.

Her breath caught in her throat as she realised something else. It had been Clark Kent who had been good company, not Superman. Once she had got over her initial wariness around him, she had been able to relax and shunt her new knowledge about him to the back of her brain and focus on him as Clark, not as Superman. Which meant that she could have enjoyed this kind of evening with him before she knew his secret. Why hadn't she? Had she been that blinded by the super-hero that she had ignored the nice guy standing before her? She must have been. Poor Clark. He really did deserve to be liked for himself.

Why had she been so dazzled by the super-hero? On the other hand, why was it such a relief to let go of that infatuation for these new feelings for her partner? Darned if she knew, but for right now, she was comfortable getting to know Clark a little bit at a time, and not rushing into anything.

Clark went to work, very curious as to how Lois would behave today. She greeted him with a steaming cup of coffee prepared 'exactly the way you like it'. Unfortunately, she had forgotten to check that the coffee was fresh before pouring a cup, but she still got an A for effort in his book. He managed to choke down the thick, bitter brew, pretending complete enjoyment and satisfaction, not wanting to do anything that might jeopardise this new attitude of hers towards him.

With a glare at Ralph who was hovering in the background, Lois grabbed a donut out of the box to serve to him.

Clark grinned at her as he accepted it, only to be gripped with horror as an idea occurred to him.

"Oh, God, Lois! You're sick, aren't you?"

"Huh?"

"You're dying. That's why you're acting this way. I read that fatal illnesses can change people's perspective on life and..."

"What? That's ridiculous," Lois interrupted, giggling girlishly. "No, I'm not dying, Clark. There you go again, pretending that I never do anything for you. I told you yesterday. You're my friend. I like to do things for you." She patted him awkwardly on the arm and headed for her computer.

The rest of the morning was a little easier for Lois. Going out for dinner with Clark had been a good thing to do. It had made her relax and start to see Clark for himself, instead of being overlaid with this splendid vision of red, blue and yellow. Oh, she knew that he'd never, ever be 'just Clark' to her again, but at least she could talk to him for a minute or two before she started obsessing about who he was in his spare time.

Checking her watch, she noted that it was almost noon. Maybe she should follow up on last night's successful dinner and ask Clark if he wanted to join her for lunch. Just as she was about to push herself out of her chair to approach him, the elevator dinged and Lois looked up to see Mayson Drake emerge. The blonde made a beeline for Clark, much to Lois's dismay.

There was no way for Lois to miss the conversation. She heard it in every painful detail.

"Hi, Clark," Mayson said, enthusiastically.

"Oh, hi, Mayson. I wasn't expecting to see you," Clark said, warmly.

"Oh, well, you know. I just thought that... Uh, I was in the area and I thought I'd take a chance that you might be free for lunch," the Assistant District Attorney said fatuously as she batted her eyelashes at Clark.

Clark paused for a long moment. Lois held her breath, hoping to hear him turn Mayson down, but it wasn't to be. She kept her head down, not looking at them. If she had looked, she would have seen Clark sending a questioning glance her way before finally answering Mayson.

"I'd love to," Clark said, slowly. At least he didn't sound too enthusiastic, Lois thought.

"Great!" Mayson exclaimed brightly as she hooked her arm into Clark's and tugged him towards the elevator.

Lois lifted her head and watched as the elevator doors closed behind the two of them. "Great," she muttered.

It was a long hour, waiting for Clark to return from his lunch date with Mayson. Lois had ended up getting a soda and a stale cheese sandwich from the vending machines. She had finished the soda but had only been able to choke down half the sandwich before discarding it.

She couldn't help but think about Clark and Mayson having a nice meal together, enjoying themselves and each other. By the time Clark returned, she had worked herself into quite a bad mood.

As it happened, Lois and Clark had a fair amount of separate work to do that afternoon. If they had had to work more closely together, Clark would have soon realised that Lois had made a massive attitude adjustment.

They both had to stay a few minutes late, tidying up files and checking on a few details for tomorrow's stories. The newsroom was almost empty with the exception of Perry still ensconced in his office. However, he had closed his door so he could clean up some of his administrative paperwork without interruption. As she straightened up her desk, Lois glanced over at Clark. "So," she said, diffidently, "did you have a nice time at lunch?"

"Uh huh," Clark answered, absentmindedly, as he quickly brought his notes up to date.

"Do you think you'll be seeing Mayson again?" Lois asked, striving to be nonchalant.

"What? Oh, maybe," Clark answered without looking up. If he had, he would have been able to read the storm signals that Lois was sending out, but he was busy, and he didn't.

"Oh, really," Lois drawled, feeling ignored. "What do you see in her anyway, Clark?" Her voice was steely and filled with venom, and this did capture his attention. She walked over and perched on the corner of his desk.

"Uh, she's very nice," he said as he looked up, almost feeling guilty admitting this.

"Don't you find her a little... needy?" Lois asked. "She strikes me as someone who's very desperate for a man. Not a very attractive quality in a woman if you ask me," Lois pointed out, sarcastically.

Clark was starting to get a little annoyed. All these mixed signals from Lois were pretty confusing. He was a little irritated by how she was first warm, then cold with him. "Are you saying that the only women who find me attractive are needy ones?" he asked, sharply.

"No, I'm just asking if you really think that you have any kind of a future with her," Lois retorted, angrily, so caught up in the argument that she had no idea what she was saying.

"Well, maybe I do," Clark replied, retaliating in kind.

"Oh, really. And how could you possibly have a future with a woman who thinks of you with distaste?" Lois asked, the words pouring out of her on their own.

"What? Mayson enjoys my company. She doesn't think of me with distaste," Clark said, plainly confused by this new attack.

"Hah!" Lois exclaimed, triumphantly. "That's because she doesn't

know, does she, Clark? She doesn't know about your alter-ego, does she, Superman?"

Her words just hung in the air for a long moment with no reaction from him. Lois's hand crept up to cover her open mouth as she realised what she had just said.

"You know?" he finally asked, his voice shaking a bit.

Wide-eyed, Lois nodded.

"When did you find out?" he asked, quietly.

"My Uncle Mike and I figured it out," she said, tentatively. "He recognised you when you rescued him from the Skins, but then when you, when Superman told me that he had been the cop, well..."

"You know, and your uncle knows?" Clark asked, incredulously.

Lois nodded again.

As she watched, Clark grimaced and closed his eyes, obviously thinking hard. When he opened his eyes again, Lois was shocked. His eyes were cold as they rested on her. "So, is it just you and your uncle, or did you tell anyone else?"

"No, it's not like that, Clark. I wouldn't tell anyone. I couldn't have figured it out on my own and Uncle Mike couldn't have either. He already said he wasn't going to tell, and I won't either - you have to believe me. I wouldn't do that to you, Clark. I care about you too much," Lois said, her voice faltering under the weight of his icy gaze.

"Don't you mean you care about Superman too much, Lois?" Clark asked, coolly.

"What? No... Okay, it was like that at first, but not now!" she exclaimed.

Clark sat back wearily in his chair. "I find that really hard to believe. How long have I been trying to make you notice me, Clark Kent, instead of some guy in tights? And did you ever? No, not until you found out my secret," he pointed out, bitterly.

"No, no! It's not like that, Clark. You have to believe me," Lois protested.

"Under the circumstances, I don't see how I can, Lois," Clark said, ironically.

Lois blanched as she remembered the last time he had said those words to her.

"I'm sorry," she said, flustered and upset. "I didn't mean to hurt you that night, Clark, and I didn't mean to hurt you now." She laid a shaking hand gently on his arm only to feel him flinch under her touch. "Please, Clark? Don't shut me out."

"Don't shut you out?" Clark exclaimed as he pulled away from her. "Why shouldn't I? Since the first day I met you, that's all you've

done to me. Turnabout's fair play in my book."

"But you don't understand!" Lois exclaimed in frustration. "My attitude did change because you're Superman, but not for the reason you think."

Clark looked around the empty newsroom. "Could you speak a little louder, Lois? I don't think Perry could quite hear you. Maybe I should go fetch him. That way, you won't have to worry about straining your voice."

"I'm sorry," Lois said, dropping her voice to a whisper. "Please, Clark. You have to listen to me. I want to explain."

"Oh, well then, go ahead," Clark said, sarcastically, waving his hand graciously in front of him. "Be my guest. Explain to me exactly why your attitude did a major about-face at the same time that you found out something interesting about me." He leaned back in his chair, folded his arms in front of his chest and waited.

"It's not that easy to explain, but I'll try," Lois said, hesitantly.

As she was about to continue, Clark bolted up out of his chair and put his hand out shushing her.

"What? What is it?" she hissed.

"Shhh, I'm trying to listen," he said to her frustration. After a moment, he turned his attention back to her. "I have to go," he said quietly.

"What's going on?" she asked, impatiently.

"Sirens. Lots of them. I've got to go now."

Before Lois could ask another question, Clark was gone, the door to the stairs banging shut behind him.

"At least he's not returning a video," she muttered to herself before bursting into tears of frustration.

Clark soared through the air heading for home, feeling a need to retreat and lick his wounds in privacy for a while. It wasn't that late, but it had been a busy night of doing nothing important. Some nights were just like that. The first set of sirens he had heard had turned out to be nothing more than a bunch of kids setting off a false alarm. They had been educated by the fire chief, assorted police officers and Superman himself as to why that had been a really, really bad idea. Once the super-hero and the assorted city personnel had finished with them, the kids had been turned over to their parents who were even more upset than the other adults had been. Clark smiled as he remembered the sight of one hulking teenager being dragged home by his petite mother. His smile faded as he recalled something else. That kid's mother had looked like Lois, and he didn't want to think about Lois right now.

That incident had been followed by any number of fender benders. He

hadn't stayed too long at those, but he had put in an appearance, making sure people weren't hurt. Then, he had rescued two dogs from the river and one cat from a tree. He had changed three flat tires and replaced the chains on two bicycles. All small stuff, but still time consuming.

Now, he just wanted to go home. He was too raw to sort out exactly what he was feeling. He just knew one thing; he felt horrible. What a difference twenty-four hours had made. Last night he had been thrilled and hopeful; tonight, he was dejected with all his hopes dashed to the ground.

He had felt sick, literally sick, for the first time in his life when he had realised that Lois's new attitude was a result of her having figured out that Superman was alive and well and living inside Clark Kent. Obviously, she was only willing to accept Clark in her life if that was what it took for her to be with Superman. He pushed those thoughts to the back of his mind as he tried to focus on his sweep of the city.

With a shock, he realised that he was flying over the Southside area of Metropolis. He looked down and was further jolted by the fact that he could see Mike Lane sweeping the sidewalk in front of his restaurant. On an impulse, he swooped down and landed in front of the startled man, not really sure what he was here for.

"Superman!" Mike Lane exclaimed.

Clark was relieved to hear that name on the other man's lips. As soon as Lois had told him that she and her uncle both knew his secret, he had been afraid that they would both get clumsy with it. His lips tightened as he reflected that there was still plenty of time for his secret to be bandied about to all and sundry, but at least this was a good start.

"Hi, Mr. Lane," Clark responded, stiffly. "I thought I would, uh, check and see how you're doing after the other night."

"Fine, thanks to you." The older man turned and surveyed the empty street before focusing on Clark once more. Even though there wasn't a soul around, he dropped his voice. "From the look on your face and the tone of your voice, I would guess that my niece let you know what we figured out."

Clark inclined his head in agreement.

"Why don't you come on in, sit down and have a cup of coffee and a piece of cake, and we'll talk about it?" Mike suggested, calmly.

"Okay," Clark agreed slowly, not sure if this was a good idea or not.

"So, tell me, Superman," Mike asked as he led the super-hero inside. "Are you as crazy about chocolate as my niece, or would you prefer to have something other than chocolate cake? I have a nice cr  me caramel as well as a cherry flan."

"The cr  me caramel would be great. Thank you, Mr. Lane," Clark said as he took care to arrange his cape before sitting down.

"You called me 'Mike' the other day," Mike said as he served the desserts and coffee before taking his seat opposite the colourful super-hero.

"Sorry, Mike." Clark smiled politely at the older man.

"First of all, would you stop looking so worried? I'm not going to tell a soul. You really helped me out - saved my bacon, in fact - and I would be a pretty poor human being if I paid you back like that." Mike sipped his hot coffee before continuing, "Besides, who would I tell?"

Clark snorted. "I can think of quite a few people who would pay you quite a bit of money for this info."

"Yeah, but how much self-respect would I be able to buy with it?" Mike retorted. "No. Anyone who wants to know about you this badly, doesn't need to know about you, if you know what I mean."

"Oh, yeah. I know exactly what you mean," Clark answered with a smile, relaxing in his chair.

"So, how are things with you and Lois?" Mike asked as he sipped his coffee.

Clark shifted restlessly in his chair. "Fine."

Mike laughed. "In other words, knowing my niece, they're a mess."

"Yeah." Clark nodded slowly.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Mike asked.

"No, I don't think so, but thanks for asking." Clark scraped the rest of his crème caramel up with his fork before getting up from his chair. He extended his hand to the older man. "Thanks for reassuring me about the other thing, Mike. I appreciate it. It's good to know that I have a friend that I can count on."

Mike shook Clark's hand firmly. "Listen. You don't have to tell me what's wrong between the two of you, but I want you to know something. When Lois left here the other day, after we figured out, you know, she was very upset. She kept telling me how cruel she had been to you - not you, Superman, but you, Clark - and how she was going to make it up to you. After she had a chance to think about everything, that's what upset her the most - that she had caused you so much pain. She really cares about you, Superman."

That was the problem, Clark thought to himself. She cared about Superman; she didn't care about Clark. He shook his head slowly. "That's nice to know and everything, but it doesn't really help solve the problem. Thanks for trying, though, Mike."

"No problem. Come back anytime for a piece of pie. But, Superman?"

"What?"

"It might be better if you came as Clark Kent, next time." Mike surreptitiously pointed at the window to the restaurant.

Clark looked over to see at least a dozen wide-eyed faces pressed up against the panes of glass, the people peering goggle-eyed in at him. He turned back to Mike and smiled. "You know what they say. Nothing like free publicity."

"I don't think this is quite what they had in mind," Mike said, with a grin.

Clark strode theatrically to the door of the restaurant, his cape swirling majestically behind him. As he opened the door, he turned back and very audibly enunciated, "Thanks, Mr. Lane. That was the best dessert and coffee I've had in a long time. I'll make a point of visiting again."

Playing to the audience, Mike strolled towards the door, his broom once more in hand. "You're welcome, Superman. Glad you liked it. Feel free to stop in anytime." He followed the super-hero outside and waved once at Clark as he launched himself into the sky.

The crowd of onlookers watched as Superman disappeared into the distance, then turned as one to gape at Mike.

"Would you guys mind moving? I'm trying to tidy up here," Mike said, nonchalantly as he plied his broom against the pavement. "Unless..."

The crowd hung on his words.

"Well, I have a lot of crÃ"me caramel left over. That's what he had - seemed to like it. Anyone else want to give it a try?"

Mike watched with satisfaction as all the seats in his tiny restaurant filled up in the blink of an eye.

Clark left the restaurant feeling a lot better about Mike being in on the secret. The older man had been reassuring and calm and hadn't blinked an eye when Clark had turned up dressed as Superman, but had taken the whole thing in stride.

But Clark didn't feel any better about the whole 'Lois' thing. She had admitted to him that her new knowledge was what had caused her to change her attitude. He couldn't stand that. He didn't want Lois to be attracted to him because he happened to look half-decent in tights. No, he wanted Lois to appreciate him for his more earthly qualities - for who he was, for what was in his soul, not because he could bench-press space shuttles.

It didn't take him long to fly home, even though he was moving a lot slower than normal. A leisurely flight home was more what he was in the mood for. When he arrived home, he was greeted by his flashing answering machine. There were two messages on it, both from Lois.

"Hi, Clark. Are you there? ... Pick up, would you? ... I want to talk to you. I have to tell you how sorry I am... Okay, I guess you're out

doing, you know. Call me..."

Her voice was a little tenser in the next message, the words a little louder, and the delivery a little quicker. "Clark, there's nothing going on tonight. I've been watching the news. Come on. Answer. I know you're there ... All right. I guess you really aren't home. We need to talk. Call me, okay?"

As the second of the messages rewound, the phone rang again. Clark made no move to pick it up, letting his machine screen it for him.

"Clark Kent, you pick up the phone this minute!! We need to talk, and we need to talk now! Look, buster, you can't ignore me like this. I won't let you. I know where you live, and if you don't pick up the phone right now..."

Clark quickly lifted the phone out of its cradle. "Hi."

"Oh. Hi," Lois said, coolly.

"I just got in."

"Oh."

"There were a lot of fender benders tonight and other things like that - nothing newsworthy, but still necessary. That's why it wasn't on the news," he explained.

"Oh. So, you weren't ignoring me." Her tone thawed a little.

"No, well, maybe a little bit. I'm sorry," he said, quietly.

"That's okay. At least it is, if you'll stop ignoring me now."

"Okay."

"Will you listen to me now?"

"Yeah. I'm sorry I had to leave earlier," he said, apologetically.

"That's okay. I understand. You were needed."

"You're taking me running out on you a lot better than normal."

"That's because I know why."

"That's good because you know, it could happen at any... oh, damn!" he exclaimed, frustrated.

"What? What is it?"

"Three-alarm fire at the Bluebird apartments on Bessolo. People are trapped. I better..."

"Go!"

"I'll be late. We'll talk tomorrow, okay?" he said, quickly.

"Yeah, just one thing. Clark, are you still my friend?" Lois blurted out, her voice pleading.

His tone softened. "Always, Lois. Always. I promise. We'll talk tomorrow."

Clark hung up the phone and was gone in a blur.

By taking the subway, Lois was able to get within a block of the Bluebird Apartments in just a couple of minutes. There was a thick haze of smoke in the air. As she got closer, she could hear the crackle of the out of control fire. There was a cacophony of noise - the fire, shouts from the crowd of onlookers, police issuing instructions to the crowd - that they promptly ignored - and firefighters yelling into radios.

She strained her eyes, trying to pick out one blue, red and yellow clad form but wasn't able to see him yet.

As always, like a good little reporter, she was carrying a notepad and pen, and she promptly began to take notes. Lois interviewed a number of the bystanders, quickly determining who resided in the apartment and who were just thrill-seeking voyeurs. She had no time for the latter, but concentrated her efforts on the former, getting quite a few good quotes.

Finishing with that, she interviewed a few of the junior police officers. By batting her eyes a bit, she was able to get a lot of the facts straight without having to wait for an official announcement.

Finishing with them, she set her sights on the fire chief directing operations. Lois was moving purposefully towards him, when Clark emerged from the building, carrying the limp body of a child.

He was filthy, covered with grime, his cape singed around the edges. But it was his face that caught Lois's attention - the worry, the sadness and the fear. How many times had she seen that expression on the super-hero's face? How many things had he seen that were heartbreaking? Or evil? And yet, Clark was never cynical, but was always kind and humane. Lois was struck with wonder once more, that he was her friend - this marvellous, magical being from another planet who had the most human heart of anyone she knew.

As she watched, Clark gently laid the small boy on a gurney and left to make another trip back into the burning building. The emergency technicians quickly closed in around the boy. When Lois next caught sight of the child, he was wearing an oxygen mask and was being loaded into an ambulance. She ran over quickly. "How is he?" she asked as the workers pushed her aside to close the vehicle doors.

"Thanks to Superman, he'll be fine."

Lois moved back from the ambulance as it left for the hospital.

Thanks to Superman, the child would be fine, she repeated to herself. How many times had people said that? How many people had he helped? she asked herself.

Lois sat down on the curb, cradled her head in her hands and watched as Clark helped to get the fire under control.

She was looking despondently at her feet when two red boots moved into her field of vision.

"Lois? Are you okay?"

"No. Go away," she blurted, refusing to lift her head to look at him.

"Come on," he said, sounding a bit amused. "Let me take you home." He pulled her quickly to her feet.

Lois quickly turned to hide her face from him. "No, please. I'll be fine," she exclaimed, her words catching thickly in her throat.

"Lois? Are you crying?"

Lois bowed her head, fighting the urge to sniff. "No."

Clark gently turned her towards him and tipped her face up. "Yes, you are. What's wrong?" he asked gently.

Lois looked helplessly at the curious bystanders. "I can't tell you. Not here." She dashed a tear from her cheek.

"Want me to take you away from all this?" Clark asked, with a gentle smile.

"Please."

He bent down, scooped her up and took off, straight up. Lois didn't look around eagerly as she usually did when she flew with Superman. Instead, she hid her face against his neck. Clark was silent for a long time, which Lois was more than grateful for. She was striving mightily to bring her emotions under control, but it was slow going.

"So, do you want to talk about it?" Clark asked, sympathetically.

"Oh, Clark!" Lois buried her face even deeper into him and started sobbing incoherently.

"I guess not," Clark said, with a sigh as he held her a little closer.

By the time Clark swooped into Lois's apartment, she had managed to pull herself together. He set her gently on her feet, letting his arms slip up around her shoulders in a loose embrace. "Are you okay?"

"Oh, Clark. I made a mess of everything. I'm so sorry. I treated you horribly, and then when I tried to make it up to you, I went

overboard, and now you think that I'm shallow and insensitive and a terrible person." Lois sniffed and wiped her face with the back of her hand.

"No, I don't. I overreacted. I'm sorry. It was just a shock to find out that you knew." He gently brushed away the last remnants of her tears with his thumb. "I was upset. I'm over it. And you're not shallow. I think you're pretty terrific."

"Are you over it? Really?" Lois asked, ignoring the compliment. "I've hurt you so many times without even knowing it. I guess I was fussing over you because I wanted to be nicer to you. But then I even messed that up!" she exclaimed, bitterly.

"Hey! Stop beating yourself up about this. It's not your fault that I got touchy. So you were nicer to me. So what! It's not like you suddenly vowed your undying love to me the second you found out," he gestured at his brightly clad body with a laugh, "about this. If you had done that, I would have really had my feelings hurt. I was always afraid that you... that people might prefer Superman to me, Clark."

"Oh, no. I wouldn't do that to you, Clark. No way. Uh uh. Nope. That would be insensitive," Lois agreed, a fake smile plastered on her face masking her shock at his words.

"Good." He paused and smiled warmly at her. "So, I guess you have a lot of questions about all this, right?"

"I just have one that I want answered right now. Clark, do you love me?" The words spilled out of her mouth without warning. She waited with bated breath for his response

Clark blinked, and turned to the window, suddenly looking very weary. "Yes, I do, Lois" he said, quietly. "I am completely and totally in love with you. I have been since the day we met."

"Oh, Clark..."

"No, please don't say anything." He gripped the window frame and bowed his head. "There's nothing you could say that wouldn't hurt right now. If you told me you love me, too - now that you know about me - I couldn't stand it."

"No, Clark. I won't do that," Lois said, softly.

"I better go. Are you going to be all right?" Clark asked over his shoulder.

"Yes," she assured him quickly.

"Then I'll say goodnight."

"See you tomorrow, Clark."

Clark paused for a second at her words. "Yes, tomorrow," he said, remotely. He flew out the window and didn't look back.

Lois watched him leave, her heart breaking when she saw how hurt he looked. Somehow, knowing how he felt about her made her feel even

worse. She had hurt him more than she had thought possible. So much for the illusion that Superman wasn't vulnerable.

And not only had she been stripped of all her illusions about Superman, but also, if she told Clark how she felt, he would never believe it, thinking she preferred the super-hero to the reporter.

Did she, she wondered? Two days ago, she would have had a glib answer to the question, but not now. No, now that she knew what Clark Kent was hiding, she knew that everything she loved in Superman was part of him, plus so much more. It was both a relief and a source of terror to know that the super-hero was not really a real person - a relief because it had become very tiring maintaining him on the pedestal upon which she had placed him, and a source of terror because now she could contemplate what it would be like to have a romantic entanglement with him. She snorted, thinking about it. Entanglement was the perfect word for what they were in right now. Everything was a snarled and tangled mess just like every other romantic relationship she had ever had. This had to be a record though, having the whole thing fall apart before it even had a chance to get started. It wasn't fair.

"Damn it all!" she snarled. In a fit of pique, she threw her purse blindly at the wall, only to hear a crunch of broken china and glass as one of her lamps smashed against the floor.

Clark sat glumly on top of Lois's apartment building, trying to make sense of her mercurial moods. He was feeling totally confused, but he thought he had one thing straight. She had gone overboard being nice to him because she felt guilty for having treated Clark worse than Superman. That was good, wasn't it? He was so mixed up he wasn't sure.

She wasn't angry; that was a plus. And she wasn't hurt; at least he didn't think she was. But she did feel really, really guilty. He didn't like seeing her be so hard on herself, putting herself through such pain.

There was one big question he was afraid to ask. How did she feel about him, now? If she did have feelings for him, would that be a good thing or a bad thing? He did want her to love him, but he wanted her to love him for Clark, not for Superman, so it would be bad, but on the other hand, it would be better if she did love him than if she had no feelings for him at all. Maybe. He wasn't sure. And, if he kept thinking about it, he just might get the first headache he had ever had.

Suddenly, he heard Lois swear, "Damn it all," followed by a thud and a crash. He didn't even have to think about it. He was standing in front of her less than a second later.

"Are you all right?" he asked, worried by how upset she looked.

"No. I'm not all right, and we're not all right, and nothing's all right!" Lois exclaimed loudly, with her fists clenched and her eyes flashing. "You love me, but you don't want me to love you because

you're afraid that I prefer Superman to you. Clark, I don't want to love you, because being in love with a real person who might be able to return my feelings, scares me more than words could say. Even so, even knowing all that, I'm completely and totally in love with you. And I can't deny that knowing you're also Superman is the reason that I took a second look at you. I can't deny that I had feelings for Superman, but they were safe feelings. He never threatened my peace of mind because I knew all along I could never be with him. So, I'm not in love with you because you're Superman, but because you're you, but I never would have known I was in love with you if I hadn't known about the other thing... so, no, I'm not all right, Clark. And I'm sorry. I'm sorry that I was too pigheaded to see you, Clark Kent, instead of some make-believe Prince Charming in tights and a cape. I'm sorry that I was insensitive and shallow and selfish. I'm sorry. But I'm in love with you and I can't pretend that I'm not. I'm tired of pretending."

Clark stood rigid, unable to take in everything that Lois had said. He was having trouble processing the information she was throwing at him. She was in love with him. And the only reason that she was, was because he was Superman, too. He half turned away from her, too dejected to even look at her, when he caught sight of their reflection in her hallway mirror - a petite woman next to a tall man in red, blue and yellow, cape hanging limply behind him.

"And this is your fault, too, Clark Kent," she yelled, her tiny reflection waving an index finger at his back. "If you hadn't encouraged me as Superman, none of this would have happened..."

Clark stood mesmerized, watching the mirror image of the woman he loved scold and berate him. Suddenly, the implications of exactly how Lois was reacting to him, hit him like a thunderbolt.

"... And, aren't you going to say anything? I just totally opened up to you, Clark, and I'd like a little feedback from you, unless you like seeing me standing here waiting, twiddling my thumbs and..."

"What did you just call me?" Clark asked, hoarsely.

"What?"

"You just called me Clark."

"Well, duh. That's your name."

"No, I mean, here I am standing here, dressed like this," and he gestured at his tights, boots and cape, "and you called me 'Clark'. Not 'Superman'. You were yelling at me. You always yell at me, Clark. You never yell at me, Superman. This whole time since you found out about me, you've never once seen Clark as really being Superman, have you? But you see Superman as being Clark, don't you?" His words spilled out, faster and faster, as he got more and more excited by the implications.

Lois frowned, obviously trying to puzzle out the meaning of what he had just said. "I think so," she said, tentatively.

"Lois, when you say that you love me, just who are you saying it to?"

Clark asked, his heart in his throat.

"You lunkhead, haven't you been listening to me? I love you, Clark Kent."

"And you're not in love with Superman anymore?" he asked, a grin slowly spreading across his face.

"How could I be, Clark, when he doesn't really exist?" she replied, smiling warmly in response.

"But you're scared to be with me."

"I'd be more scared to not be with you," she admitted, glancing up at him shyly.

"And you're not dazzled by the colourful, flashy outfit?"

"I think I'd be more dazzled if you weren't wearing it," she purred, throatily.

Clark blinked hard.

Lois looked at him in exasperation. "Clark, what are you waiting for?"

He looked at her blankly.

She sighed, and then before he knew it was happening, she launched herself at him so fast his head was spinning. Their lips met in a kiss so passionate it made his toes curl inside his boots.

"Oh, Clark," she murmured. "Don't ever doubt how I feel about you, okay? I love you, Clark Kent - not that other guy."

"I love you, too, Lois," he murmured, bending his head to kiss her once more.

"Although..." She paused.

"Although?" he prompted her.

"Well, it's only right that I do love the other guy, too, at least a little bit, because he is a part of you, which is good because he can fly, and I like to fly, and do I have to feel guilty about enjoying the superpowers because some of them are pretty nifty? I can think of some pretty great uses for the heat vision especially in the wintertime and..."

"Lois!" Clark interrupted, laughing.

"Yes, Clark," Lois said, meekly, fake innocence plastered all over her face, the corners of her mouth twitching.

"Have I ever told you? You talk too much." He wrapped his arms around her, and kissed her once again. As they kissed, they floated up off the floor. Neither one of them even noticed.

The end.

End
file.